

Subject: ERRC Press Release: Harassment of Roma Rights Activists in Slovakia

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From: European Roma Rights Center <errc@errc.org>

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ERRC Press Release: Harassment of Roma Rights Activists in Slovakia

On November 30, 2001, the European Roma Rights Center (ERRC) sent a letter to Slovak Prime Minister Mikulas Dzurinda to express concern about the harassment of Roma rights activists in Slovakia. In one case, Mr Columbus Igboanusi, an activist lawyer of Nigerian origin, has been the target of break-ins to his flat and office, has been explicitly targeted in leaflets distributed by the Slovak extreme right, and is the subject of a criminal complaint by the head of a nationalist party for his human rights activities. A second case concerns Mr Alexander Patkolo, the head of one of Slovakia's Romani parties. Mr Patkolo is the subject of a criminal complaint for his efforts to secure justice for Romani women allegedly sterilised without their informed consent. In its letter, the ERRC urges Prime Minister Dzurinda to provide Mr Igboanusi with effective police protection, as well as to ensure that police authorities take no legal action against Mr Igboanusi or Mr Patkolo in relation to the criminal complaints filed against them. The text of the ERRC letter follows:

Honourable Prime Minister Dzurinda,

The European Roma Rights Center (ERRC), an international public interest organisation which monitors the situation of Roma in Europe and provides legal defence in cases of human rights abuse, is concerned at the reported harassment of activists working on human rights issues in Slovakia.

In one series of events, Mr Columbus Igboanusi, a Nigerian citizen and lawyer working with the Bratislava-based non-governmental organisation League of Human Rights Activists and involved extensively and publicly in work to combat racism and racist attacks against, especially, Roma, non-white Slovaks and dark-skinned foreigners in Slovakia, has been subjected to repeated harassment, and police have not responded to this harassment with adequate protection. In addition, Mr Igboanusi is currently the target of a campaign by extreme right wing parties and organisations, calling for his expulsion from Slovakia, as well as his prosecution for slander, "defaming the Republic of Slovakia" and "spreading alarming reports", all crimes in Slovakia. A right wing party has filed a similar criminal complaint against Mr Alexander Patkolo, a Romani politician in Slovakia, as a result of his efforts to secure justice for Romani women who

have allegedly been sterilised absent informed consent.

In the case of Mr Igboanusi, according to testimony provided to the ERRC by Mr Igboanusi, on the evening of October 20, 2001, he was followed home from his office by a group of men. Some minutes after entering his flat, he heard a scratching at his front door and, taking a closer look, saw the handle of the front door shaking. Peering through the eye-hole in the door, he saw four men, two of whom appeared to be bearing firearms. Mr Igboanusi ran to a window, opened it, and started shouting for help. The men then reportedly fled the scene. On the following day, Mr Igboanusi reported the incident to the police. Police officers reportedly came to Mr Igboanusi's flat, looked around, took some photographs and left after some minutes. Police allegedly refused to provide him with protection, as they had "too few personnel".

Several minutes after the police left his flat on the evening of October 21, persons again reportedly attacked his home, breaking a window of his ground floor flat. Mr Igboanusi ran up to the first level of the apartment building in which he lives, jumped out the window to the street and began shouting for the police. Again, apparently, the attackers fled. Police came a second time, again conducted a rudimentary investigation and left.

On October 23, Mr Igboanusi was summoned to a local police department and questioned inter alia about the status of his organisation, including questions as to sources of financing, as well as "whether it was a member of the United Nations".

On the morning of October 25, Mr Igboanusi found, upon arrival at his office, that the lock on the door had been tampered with, apparently in an effort at break-in. Mr Igboanusi reported the incident to the police.

During a field visit to Slovakia in November 2001, the ERRC was presented with a pamphlet entitled "Citizen's Initiative -- Resistance 2001" which, among other things, calls explicitly for the "immediate expulsion" of Mr Igboanusi (in the document named as "I. Kolumba") from the Slovak Republic. The pamphlet includes an e-mail address contact for the disseminating organisation. On November 12, 2001, the General Prosecutor of the Slovak Republic reportedly opened an investigation against unknown persons in connection with the leaflet. The ERRC is of the position that, in light of the fact that the disseminating organisation has provided its contact details, identifying the perpetrators of the public threat to Mr Igboanusi ought to be carried out efficiently and without delay.

Finally, according to reports in the Slovak media of November 25 and November 27, Mr Jan Slota, head of the True Slovak National Party, has publicly called for the expulsion of Mr Igboanusi from Slovakia, on grounds that Mr Igboanusi has committed the crimes of slander, "spreading alarming

reports" and "defaming the Republic of Slovakia", all crimes in Slovakia, reportedly for "applying a double standard when evaluating the acts of Roma and non-Roma." At a press conference on November 25, Mr Slota reportedly provided a number of examples to support his views. Mr Slota is the author of famous statements about "Gypsies", most notoriously his publicly stated view that the only proper way to interact with Roma is "with a long whip in a small yard." Mr Slota repeated at the November 25 press conference his frequently stated contention that Slovaks would soon be a minority in their own country due to high Romani birth rates.

We understand that Mr Igboanusi has been provided with an alarm for his flat by Slovak police. In light of the extensive and well-publicised threats against Mr Igboanusi, the high level of attention to which he is currently subjected by members of the Slovak extreme right, as well as apparently three efforts at break-in to his home and workplace, it is clear that this measure is not adequate. Mr Igboanusi's person requires 24-hour protection, and his home and flat should be provided with regular and constant discrete police observation -- within the boundaries of respect for his right to privacy. We urge you to take all measures available within the powers of your office to ensure that preemptive measures are taken by police commensurate with the gravity of the threats against Mr Igboanusi.

A second series of events pertains to Mr Alexander Patkolo. Mr Patkolo is chairman of the political party Romani Initiative of Slovakia. According to a report by the Slovak press agency TASR, Mr Jan Slota, the aforementioned head of the True Slovak National Party, has recently filed a criminal complaint against Mr Patkolo for "spreading alarming reports" in connection with his efforts to seek justice for Romani women allegedly sterilised absent informed consent. Mr Patkolo had earlier presented documents to the police alleging that two named Romani women had been sterilised absent informed consent in the years 1995 and 1999 respectively. On November 22, TASR reported that a spokesperson for the Slovak Prosecutor's Office, Mr Stanislav Ryban, had told journalists that both complaints had been rejected. According to information reported in TASR and apparently provided by Mr Ryban, the complaint in one of the two cases had been rejected on grounds that the sterilisation had taken place in the course of an operation in life-threatening circumstances. It is unclear from TASR information whether, in fact, medical investigation took place in the second case, since the explanation provided for the reason for rejecting the complaint was that the woman at issue "does not know how to read or write, only to sign her name," and had been apparently unfamiliar with the contents of her complaint when questioned by investigators. Following an announcement by the Slovak Prosecutor's Office that the complaint had been dismissed, according to press reports, Mr Slota filed a criminal complaint against Mr Patkolo.

Honourable Prime Minister Dzurinda, it is evident from the recent flurry of

media attention paid to the issue of the alleged sterilisation of Romani women absent informed consent by medical practitioners in Slovakia, coming primarily in the context of the recent publication of a report by the Open Society Institute calling attention to the issue, that this theme is one of extreme sensitivity for both Roma and non-Roma in Slovakia. The ERRC is of the position that at the heart of the issue is:

- The failure of Slovak authorities to date to prosecute anyone in connection with the extreme breaches of medical ethics and international law which took place until 1990, when, according to extensive documentation by members of the Czechoslovak medical community, as well as by highly credible organisations such as Human Rights Watch, many Romani women were sterilised using bribes, pressure or tricks, during abortions or routine exploratory surgery, and often absent even rudimentary information about the consequences of the medical procedures at issue. Similarly, no compensation has ever been provided to victims of these practices.
- The failure of high-ranking Slovak politicians to state publicly that Slovak authorities will never again undertake the coercive sterilisations of Romani women, despite frequent suggestions by some Slovak politicians, journalists and members of the public that they should do so.

Absent even rudimentary justice for past abuses and basic affirmation from Slovak politicians that Romani women in Slovakia are safe, now and forever, from coercive sterilisation, it is to be expected that activists such as Mr Patkolo will be justly preoccupied with the issue. Should police bring charges against Mr Patkolo, his prosecution would constitute an impermissible breach of Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights, as well as Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which guarantee the right to freedom of expression. Prosecution of Mr Igboanusi for his human rights activities in Slovakia would similarly violate international law. We urge your office to ensure that police authorities take no legal action against Mr Igboanusi or Mr Patkolo in relation to the criminal complaints filed against them.

We welcome any communication with your office on the issues raised above, and respectfully request to be kept informed of any measures taken.

Sincerely,
Dimitrina Petrova
Executive Director

For more information on the sterilisation of Romani women in Czechoslovakia, see: http://errc.org/rr_nrl_2000/past_abuses.shtml). Information about the human rights situation of Roma in Slovakia is available on: <http://errc.org/publications/indices/slovakia.shtml>. Persons

wishing to express concern about issues raised above are urged to contact:

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The European Roma Rights Center is an international public interest law organisation which monitors the rights of Roma and provides legal defence in cases of human rights abuse. For more information about the European Roma Rights Center, visit the ERRC on the web at <http://www.errc.org>.

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